DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 511 CS 208 454

AUTHOR Silver, Diane
TITLE A Comparison of Newspaper Coverage of Male and Female Officials in Michigan.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (67th, Gainesville, FL, August 5-8, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Content Analysis; *Females; Legislators; *Males; Media Research; *Newspapers; *News Reporting; *Sex Bias; *Sex Differences; State Officials

ABSTRACT

To replicate previous studies indicating a consistent pattern of unequal treatment of women in newspaper coverage, a study examined how 21 Michigan newspapers treated stories involving male and female state officials over an eight-week period. In particular, the study focused on the amount of coverage, the context of the coverage, the length of stories, and the manner of identification and description of male and female officials. The effects of occupation and seniority were also probed. Approximately 450 stories were analyzed and coded. As in previous studies, the results indicated that women were mentioned less often than their male counterparts. However, when the analysis was controlled for seniority, the difference almost disappeared. The findings of the present study deviated from those in the previous studies in that they failed to show any evidence of difference in the description and identification of males and females. The study also found no real difference in the length of stories about male and female officials. However, other findings of previous studies were replicated, including differences in the contexts in which males and females were mentioned. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED248511

A COMPARISON OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF MALE AND FEMALE OFFICIALS IN MICHIGAN

By

Diane Silver
Masters Candidate
School of Journalism
Michigan State University

A paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual convention, August 1984 at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

CS 208 454

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Diane Silver

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract for: A Comparison of Newspaper Coverage of Male and Female Officials in Michigan

This study examines how 21 Michigan newspapers covered male and female state officials during the late winter of 1983. In particular, this study focuses on the number of mentions, the context of mentions, length of stories and the manner of identification and description of officials. The effects of occupation and seniority are also probed.

Every story about Michigan state officials that appeared in state newspapers with capital bureaus and in a sample of all other state dailies during the study period were analyzed.

The study findings failed to replicate the findings of previous studies in several important ways. First, the present study failed to find any evidence of differences in the description and identification of males and females. The present study also found that when the analysis was tightly controlled for occupation and seniority women received practically the same proportion of mentions as their proportion of the pool of possible newsmakers. The study also found no real difference in the length of one kind of story.

However, other findings were replicated. In particular, differences in the context of mentions of males and females and in the lengths of two kinds of stories were found.

Diane Silver
Masters Candidate
School of Journalism
Communication Arts Building
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Mich. 48824

The comparison of news coverage of male and female officials is important to both researchers and working journalists. Studies by mass communication researchers have found overemphasis on coverage of government officials to the point of neglect of ordinary citizens and minority political viewpoints. Both feminists and researchers, furthermore, have charged that news coverage either ignores or trivializes women. If the press merits either or both of these assertions, then journalists will have failed in what the American Society of Newspaper Editors calls their mission to "serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time."[1] People cannot possibly make informed judgments when they have only one part of the story.

This paper examines how 21 Michigan newspapers treated male and female state officials between Feb. 1 and April 7, 1983. In particular, the study focuses on the amount of coverage, the context of the coverage, the length of stories and manner of identification and description of male and female officials. The effects of occupation and seniority are also probed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The treatment of women by the news media has only been the subject of systematic research since the early 1970s. However, the published results of four studies undertaken since that time have shown a consistent pattern of unequal treatment of women in newspaper coverage.[2] This study seeks to replicate those four studies by examining the same kinds of variables the earlier studies explored. This will be done by determining if females or males received a disproportionate number of mentions in the sample stories,

whether they received different kinds of descriptions, were named in stories of unequal lengths or mentioned in different kinds of contexts. This study also seeks to extend the earlier work by using two controls those four studies did not include -- occupation and seniority.

Those earlier studies ranged from one by the National Organization for Women of nine newspapers in the Washington, D.C. area in the early 1970s[3] to a study of Fort Worth and Dallas newspapers in the later part of the decade.[4] The NOW project found a difference in the placement of stories about women with hard news about females appearing more often in the women's sections than in the sections of the newspapers where hard news about men appeared. Foreit et al found that in the Texas newspapers stories about women were much more likely to report personal appearance, marital status and spouse than stories about men. In a more recent analysis of 5,500 stories from eight newspapers, Davis found similar inequalities.[5] In her sample, women were the main characters in only 8.6 percent of the stories. Davis found similar differences in the length of stories and the identification and description of women. She also found that women were more likely to be the subject of what she defined as soft news than hard news stories while men were more likely to be the subject of hard news stories.[6] East and Jurney also found inequalities in coverage. They found that coverage of such women-oriented stories as the Equal Rights Amendment and the United Nations Conference for Women in 1980 was sparse and stereotypical.[7]

Even though these studies present ample evidence of what Davis calls "sexism in newspapers,"[8] the work of other researchers suggests that there might be an alternative explanation for these inequalities. Several researchers including Gans, Sigal and Fishman have noted that journalists are producing one-sided coverage by focusing on high ranking government officials while generally ignoring the rest of the population.[9] Gans, in particular, has

called this a major problem. In fact, he has suggested an approach to newsgathering that would focus on the lives and ideas of "citizens from all walks of life."[10] Since the female population is one of the most economically powerless and politically underrepresented groups in the U.S.,[11] any tendency among journalists to ignore such groups would create unequal coverage of women. Pingree and Hawkins have suggested that this may be one major explanation for the general absence of women from the news pages.[12] They note that women's lack of economic and political power automatically makes them invisible as possible subjects for news stories. Pingree and Hawkins write that in the eyes of journalists "most women are denied the decision-making power that would make their actions news, and without power and the consequent prominence, only their most obtrusive actions are newsworthy."[13]

None of the cited studies on the coverage of women controlled for differences in economic and political power between men and women. The present study seeks to fill that gap by focusing only on the coverage of men and women who fill the same or similar occupational roles and by controlling for seniority within occupation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Several research questions raised by the reviewed literature are addressed in this study.

1. Is the proportion of newspaper mentions of females smaller than the proportion of females in a particular newsworthy occupation?

Since the cited studies found that the coverage of women amounted to a much smaller proportion of the news columns than the female proportion of the total population, it is important to determine whether a similar inequality will appear if the analysis is confined to coverage of one occupation.

However, an analysis of the coverage of all people within one occupation might also be expected to show skewed results if it did not control for the relative rankings of individuals within that occupation. As Gans has noted, while it is true that the media tend to focus on government officials, it is also true that they don't give all officials the same amount of coverage. High ranking officials like the president or governor receive an overwhelmingly disproportionate amount of coverage.[14] Since females generally hold the lowest seniority, lowest ranked positions, it is vital for any study of the coverage of women to control for rank.

2. Are stories that mention females first, on the average, shorter than stories that mention males of the same occupation first?

Davis' study, in particular, found differences in length. She found that as the length of stories increased, the percentage of stories dealing with women decreased. The opposite was true for stories about men.[15]

3. Are females in a particular newsworthy occupation described more often than males in the same occupation by attire, physical attributes and marital and parental status?

Both Davis and Foreit et al found large differences in the identification and description of males and females. For example, Davis found that women were identified by marital status in about 41 percent of the stories where they were mentioned while men were only identified this way in about 7 percent of the stories.[16]

4. Are females mentioned more often than males in non-job contexts?

Davis, Foreit et al and East and Jurney all found evidence of coverage that emphasized the image of women as the stereotypically unintelligent, unworldly, passive, vain, home-minded female.[17] Such coverage also focused more on stories about women in non-job, feature contexts than on hard news coverage of women in job-related contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Every story about Michigan state officials that appeared in 21 state newspapers from Feb. 1 to April 7, 1983 was analyzed. These papers included all of those with capital bureaus and a randomly-selected sample of all other Michigan dailies.[18] Wire service stories were not included to focus the analysis on the work of newspaper journalists. The sample period was chosen to allow for the examination of the coverage of a normal legislative session. Approximately 450 stories were analyzed. The unit of analysis was the story.

The coding was carried out in the following manner. The number of mentions was determined by coding the names of the first and second state officials encountered in each story. Any mention of an official's physical appearance, clothing, marital status, any use of the courtesy titles Miss or Mrs, or any mention of an official's children or of the fact that an official is a parent was also coded. The context of the coded mentions of officials was recorded as either job-related or non-job related.[19]

The analysis of the results was limited in two ways. First, mentions of the governor, a male, were not included because he received a disproportionate amount of coverage. Including him would have skewed the results.[20] Second, the analysis of physical description and marital and parental status was limited to legislators to allow for the greatest control for occupation.

Three different kinds of analysis were carried out. The first two focused only on coverage of state legislators. One analysis included all legislators and the other included all female legislators and male legislators who had the same seniority as the women.[21] The third analysis included all state officials. The different kinds of analysis were chosen to control for occupation while correcting for problems created by that control. The legislative study provides the most rigorous control, but fails to provide a large enough number of cases to allow for confident generalizations.

The analysis of all state official coverage, while not as tightly controlled as the legislative analysis, provides a large number of cases.

FINDINGS

Number of Mentions

As in the cited studies the present study found that women were mentioned less often than their male counterparts. However, when the analysis was controlled for seniority the differences almost disappeared. Females were mentioned from 7 to 8 percentage points less than their 26 percent of the total population of state officials.[22] Women legislators were mentioned in around 7 percent of the stories even though they make up about 11 percent of the state legislature. However, in the pool of low-seniority legislators, women, who are 15 percent of the total pool, received 14.5 percent of the first official mentions. They received 13 percent of the second official mentions.

Story Length

Again part of the analysis shows differences between the coverage of males and females. The greatest difference in length occurred in stories about all legislators. Here stories with females as the first officials averaged 100 words less than stories with males mentioned first. In this case the female stories averaged 363 words while the male stories ran 476 words. Story length also appeared to barely be affected by seniority. Stories with low-seniority male legislators mentioned first averaged 464 words and were still about 100 words longer than stories with females as the first officials.

The analysis of the length of stories about all officials showed that the stories were of nearly equal length. In this situation stories with women as the first official were, on an average, longer than male first official stories.

The female stories averaged 485 words while the male stories averaged 477 words.

Description

Of the more than 200 times legislators were mentioned, attire, physical attributes, marital and parental status were noted three times. Of these mentions, one involved a woman -- a state representative who was mentioned with her state senator husband in a feature about their life as husband and wife lawmakers. The legislator who received the most complete description with attire, looks, marital and parental status all noted was the newly chosen Speaker of the House, who is male. All of those descriptions came in a story where he was mentioned in a leadership context. Except for the feature story about the husband and wife lawmakers, the courtesy titles Mrs and Miss that denote marital status were not used for any of the female legislators during the study period.

Contexts of Mentions

Both the analysis of the coverage of legislators and the coverage of all state officials indicates that women were mentioned in more non-job or feature contexts than job-related contexts. While almost all of the mentions of male officials were in a job context with over 99 percent in that context, 95 percent of female mentions were in a job context. The difference is more pronounced when the analysis is narrowed to only include stories about legislators. In that group, females were mentioned in job-related contexts 79 percent of the time while males received job-related mentions 98 percent of the time. Approximately 21 percent of the mentions of female legislators were in a feature context.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the present study have deviated from the findings of the four cited studies in several important ways. First, the present study

failed to find any evidence of difference in the description and identification of males and females. The present study also found that when the analysis was controlled for occupation and seniority women received practically the same proportion of coverage as their proportion of the pool of possible newsmakers. The study also found no real difference in length of stories about all state officials.

However, other findings of the previous studies were replicated in the present work. Differences in context of mentions of males and females were found. Differences in length were also found in legislative stories. Significantly, the difference in length did not change when the analysis was controlled for seniority.

It is important to note that the coverage analyzed in this study is from a small geographic area and a short period of time. The limitations of the content analysis method also make it impossible to generalize about either the intentions of the journalists who produced the stories or the messages received by the audiences who read them.

However, the results of this study appear to be unique because they do not show clear-cut bias in all areas examined. This is important because it provides at least partial evidence supporting Pingree and Hawkin's explanation of women's invisiblity in newspapers and supports the work of other researchers who have noted that occupation seems to be a determinant of coverage.

In fact, it is possible that the effects of occupation and rank may have at least partially caused the story length to vary so greatly from stories about legislators to stories about all officials. Forty four of the 91 stories where females were mentioned as the first official involved two of the three women who were the highest ranking females in the state during the study period.

One was a state supreme court justice and the other headed the state social service department.[23] Both women were also involved in controversies with major political and legal implications. One of the controversies also became an international story. Both women consistently made the front pages with stories ranging from 600 to 800 words long. Thus, it is quite possible that the length of these stories significantly increased the average length of the female stories in the part of the analysis that looked at all officials. It is also possible that the length of these stories and their unusual number was partially the result of the high rank of the women involved. Of course, the magnitude of the conflicts involving the two women could also have been a factor in determining story length.

If it is true that occupation and seniority effect coverage, than it is possible that the previous studies, which found evidence of unequal coverage of men and women, may not have been measuring sexism in the minds of journalists. Instead, the studies may have been measuring the sexism of a society which discriminates against women and keeps them from reaching the high-ranking political positions that most journalists have defined as newsworthy. The significance of this is that any attempt by journalists to change the quality of coverage of women would probably have to include a change in the definition of news. Such a redefinition could take several forms. "Significance" could be redefined to include the things that are significant about people who do not have power -- their oppression and their fight to end that oppression. A redefinition could also move the focus of journalism to such subjects as economic and social trends in society and issues involving the quality of life.

The difference in the findings of the present study and the previous work could also be explained as a result of the success of the women's movement in educating journalists about the importance of equal coverage of men and women. This is supported by the fact that many newspapers in the past few years have dropped the use of courtesy titles before women's names. Thus, earlier studies might have reflected the sexism of coverage of their time, while this study may have reflected a more recent, nonsexist kind of coverage.

However, it is important to note that the findings in the areas of contexts and the length of legislative stories do replicate previous studies and indicate continuing inequalities in the coverage of men and women in this particular time and place. This suggests that even when occupation and seniority are controlled, inequalities can occur. A more long term study of the context in which women in newsworthy occupations are mentioned is needed to clarify the situation. Such a content analysis coupled with a survey of the attitudes toward women of the reporters who produced the coverage would also be invaluable.

REFERENCES

[1]American Society of Newspaper Editors, "Statement of Principles," quoted in Catherine East and Dorothy Misener Jurney, New Directions for News. (American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Women Studies Program and Policy Center of The George Washington University, 1983).

[2]National Organization for Women, Northern Virginia Chapter, Newspaper Monitoring Project. (Arlington, VA: NOW, Northern Virginia Chapter, 1973); Karen G. Foreit, Terna Agor, Johnny Byers, John Larue, Helen Lokey, Michael Pallazzini, Michele Patterson and Lillian Smith, "Sex Bias in the Newspaper Treatment of Male-Centered and Female-Centered News Stories." Sex Roles 6 (1980): 475-80; Junetta Davis, "Sexist Bias in Eight Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly 59 (1982): 456-60 and Vicki S. Brown (ed.) How Eight Newspapers Portray Women -- A Content Analysis.(Norman, Okla.: H.H. Herbert School of Journalism and Mass Communication); Catherine East and Dorothy Misener Jurney, New Directions for News. (American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Women STudies Program and Policy Center of The George Washington University, 1983).

[3]NOW

[4]Foreit et al

[5]Davis and Brown

[6]Davis, p. 457-8. She defined hard news as "a report of a major news event or of a serious or sober nature." Soft news stories were defined as "less timely, lighter or minor news items or features."

[7]East and Jurney, p. 6-23.

[8]Davis, p. 460.

[9]Herbert J. Gans, Deciding What's News. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Leon V. Sigal, Reporters and Officials. (Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1973); and Mark Fishman, Manufacturing the News. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1980).

[10]Gans, p. 313.

[11]For a summary of women's status in the U.S. see Mary Anne Baker, Catherine White Berheide, Fay Ross Greckel, Linda Garstarphen Guigin, Margia J. Lipetz and Marcia Texler Segal, Women Today.(Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1980) and National Commission on the Observance of the International Women's Year, The Spirit of Houston. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978).

[12]Suzanne Pingree and Robert P. Hawkins, "News Definitions and Their Effects on Women," in Laurily Keir Epstein, Women and the News. (New York: Hastings House, 1978).

[13]Pingree and Hawkins, p. 122.

[14]Gans, p. 8-15.

[15]Brown.

[16]Davis, p. 458 and Brown.

[17]For a complete discussion of sex stereotyping see Inge K. Broverman, Susan Raymond Vogel, Donald K. Broverman, Frank K. Clarkson and Paul S. Rosenkrantz. "Sex-Role Stereotypes: A Current Appraisal." Journal of Social Issues 28 (1972): 59-78 and Rhoda Unger, Female and Male. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

[18]The newspapers with capital bureaus that were included are the Detroit Free Press; Detroit News; The Battle Creek Enquirer-News, Lansing State Journal and Port Huron Times Herald, which all used Gannett bureau copy; The Flint Journal and Grand Rapids Press, which ran Booth News Bureau stories; and The Plymouth Community Crier, Houghton Daily Mining Gazette, Holland Sentinel, Lapeer County Press, Midland Daily News, Monroe Evening News, Petoskey News-Review, Sturgis Journal and Traverse City Record Eagle, which used Capital News Service stories. CNS is a semi-professional bureau which is financed by Michigan State University and uses advanced journalism students as reporters.

Newspapers without state capital bureaus that were included in the sample are The Dowagiac Daily News, Huron Daily Tribune, Ludington Daily News, Macomb Daily and Royal Oak Tribune.

About 56 percent of the stories were produced by the professional news bureaus, 32 percent were written by non-bureau newspaper reporters and 8 percent were produced by CNS. The origins of 4 percent of the stories could not be identified.

[19]Job-related contexts were considered to be any mention of the official in the context of leadership, bill advocate and/or opponent, home district partisan, corruption or impropriety, comments on and reactions on state topics, comments and reactions on non-state topics and appointments to posts. Ceremonial activities, amusing incidents and features on life or lifestyle were categorized as non-job contexts. Categories for accidents and illness and "other" were coded, but were not included in the analysis.

[20]Michigan Gov. James Blanchard was mentioned as the first official in more than 34 percent of the 455 stories collected during the study. He was mentioned as the second official in 14 percent of the stories.

[21]Since the woman lawmaker with the greatest seniority in the Michigan Legislature had five terms of service during the study period, only male legislators with five terms or less were included in this part of the analysis.

[22]The female proportion of the population of state officials was calculated by counting the number of women listed under any job title other than secretary or technician in the State of Michigan Telephone Directory, prepared by the Department of Management and Budget, November 1983.

[23]State Supreme Court Justice Dorothy Riley and Department of Social Services Director Sister Agnes Mansour were involved in two of the biggest stories of the period. Riley, whose appointment to the court was one of the last official acts of a lame-duck Republican governor, was the center of a conflict over whether or not the out-going governor had the authority to appoint her. The new governor, a Democrat, and the attorney general, who is also a Democrat, claimed that the old governor did not have the authority. Riley was eventually removed from the court. Mansour, a nun, made headlines when she refused to step down from her job as head of the state's welfare department. When Rome entered the controversy, Mansour resigned from her religious order and kept her position with the state.

TABLE I: MENTIONS IN STORIES OF ALL STATE OFFICIALS

A. The First Official Mentioned

(n=251)

	female	male
percentage of total population of state officials	26	74
percentage of first mentions	18	82

B. The Second Official Mentioned

(n=256)

	female	male
percentage of total population of state officials	26	74
percentage of second mentions	17	83

TABLE II: MENTIONS OF LEGISLATORS

A. The First Official Mentioned

(n=107)

	female	male
percentage of total population of legislators	11	89
percentage of first mentions	7.5	92.5

B. The Second Official Mentioned

(n=119)

	female	male
percentage of total population of legislators	11	89
percentage of second mentions	7	93

TABLE III: MENTIONS OF LOW-SENIORITY LEGISLATORS

A. The First Official Mentioned

(n=55)

	female	male
percentage of total population of low-seniority legislators	15	85
percentage of first mentions	14.5	85.5

B. The Second Official Mentioned

(n=61)

	female	male
percentage of total population of low-seniority legislators	15	85
percentage of second mentions	13	87

TABLE IV: AVERAGE STORY LENGTH

A. All Officials

(n=421)

	female	male
average word length	485	477

B. All Legislators

(n=106)

	female	male
average word length	363	486

C. Low-Seniority Legislators

(n=55)

	female	male
average word length	363	464

TABLE V: CONTEXTS OF MENTIONS OF ALL STATE OFFICIALS

	female	male
job-related	95%	99.5%
non-job-related/feature	5%	0.5%

female n = 89
male n = 412

TABLE VI: CONTEXTS OF MENTIONS OF LEGISLATORS

	female	male
job-related	79%	98%
non-job-related/feature	21%	2%

female n = 14

male n = 208